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LAUGHTER, A GLORY IN SANITY

By RANSOM CARPENTER

In offering a theory of laughter to the judgment of psychologists I must begin by explaining that I am not myself a psychologist, and that in preparing the matter here following I have necessarily written as if addressing readers of my own nontechnical level.

Without knowing (or possibly having forgotten) that the nature of the comic was a favorite riddle of philosophers, I reached an answer that satisfied my own curiosity, and later went to a library to consult the authorities. My impression grew, the more I read, that in the attempt to explain so universal, familiar, and open a phenomenon as laughter there was a tendency to resort to solutions either limited in scope or abstruse and indirect in their application. The true answer, I thought, must needs be as broad and simple as laughter itself; yet the exertions of printed philosophy seemed to display an unaccountable strain toward the narrow and complex.

That there are manifold mental complexities underlying and surrounding the act of laughter I do not question. That field remains for better equipped explorers. I simply place on view a bit of mental mechanism which, when once pointed out, I believe brief introspection will identify to any thinker as the main actuating principle of laughter, but which for some mysterious reason has eluded the notice of other inquirers.

Indeed I cannot suppose that no one else has formulated, at least to himself, so simple a principle. I only know that a fairly careful search of available publications,¹ including recent copious works that review the prior field exhaustively, has failed to disclose a single line that definitely anticipates my explanation.

Now I shall try to state, in my own way, and so far as possible without reference to any preceding theory, what it seems to me that laughter is. Laughter is the outcry of the soul exulting in sanity. Or, more soberly and completely, laughter expresses an emotion due to a sudden flooding into consciousness of the subconsciously abiding pleasure in the power of judgment, occasioned by the swift overthrow of presented propositions that tend but fail to delude the judgment.

The possession of reason is obviously good cause for continuous elation, and we do in fact rejoice in it unceasingly; it is part of that basic joy for which people cling to life despite any miseries. But our realization of it, like that of other glories, is glossed over with practical habit. We are used to it. So long as the path of thought is plain and even, we walk in it soberly, exercising our cherished judgment as a matter of course, accounting unconsciously for the multitude of facts or ideas presented, finding them in order, coherent with sanity. But let a pitfall of absurdity appear in the

¹Schopenhauer, A., *The World as Will and Idea*, iii, VIII, On the Theory of the Ludicrous.

Bergson, H. L., *Laughter; an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*; Brereton and Rothwell's trans., 1911.

Sully, James, *An Essay on Laughter*, 1902.

Freud, Sigmund, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*; Brill's trans., 1916.

Sidis, Boris, *The Psychology of Laughter*, 1913.

Bliss, Sylvia, *The Origin of Laughter*, this JOURNAL, xxvi, 1915, 236ff.

Eastman, Max, *The Sense of Humor*, 1921.

pathway, so that the mind at the same moment sees where it might have slipped yet walks erect; then the sense of sanity swells abruptly into sharp emotion that is voiced in laughter.

Why a glory in sanity should find expression in spasmodic noises is, of course, a question of physiology, with an answer lying somewhere in the long history of bodily evolution. It does not concern my purpose, which is to show what laughter is within us, the nature of the comic sense.

To make the matter clearer let us examine, in the light of this explanation, the nature of the things and ideas that provoke laughter. Why, let us ask, is one notion funnier than another?

To be comic, a proposition must be (1) perceived as false, and (2) perceived as deceptive. These are the essentials. Actually to excite laughter, it must generally also (3) be suddenly presented, and (4) have a free field, in which its effect is not submerged by stronger emotions.

An idea is most comic when all these factors are most favorable. The height of the ludicrous is reached by what is wild, yet plausible. The wilder and more plausible the rejected idea, the more sharply it throws open the valve that lets out a gust of elation at reason's triumph. The virtue of a moderately good joke may lie either in an extreme falsity with a slightly deceptive element, or in an approach to truth so near that it almost convinces. The two elements, of course, may both be of moderate force, or one or the other may dwindle within the realm of bad jokes to the vanishing point, leaving accepted truth or bare falsehood, neither of which is funny.

In one of the treatises that I examined² there is an inconclusive discussion of a previous writer's effort to penetrate the mystery of the comic aspect of a child wearing his father's hat. This example will serve as well as any for first pointing out the virtues of my solvent. We smile at this mildly funny sight because the child's pretense offers to our mind the obviously false proposition, "This hat might make you think me a man," and there is just enough plausibility in the idea for the act of rejecting it to remind us faintly of the fact that we are sane. That is all there is to the mystery.

Another favorite query of investigators is why a grotesque mask is funny. Here the falsity presented may be expressed as "There might be such a person as this," or "People are like this," and the deceptive element is obvious. The spectator's mind is put on the alert against any yielding, perhaps momentary or half conscious, to the offered illusion, and the pleasure which the ego takes in this resistance is nothing more or less than the sense of the comic.

Again, the writers often ask why we should laugh at the fall of one who slips or stumbles. Some even gloomily attribute to laughter, on this ground, a cruel or debasing element. Nothing could be more opposed to truth. If the fall is really cruel, the normal person does not laugh. A comic fall is one that presents a delusive aspect of catastrophe, which we instantly recognize as unreal, relishing the recognition. The more "scary" the fall, the greater is the exertion of judgment and the more we exult. As for the abnormal person who laughs at another's pain or misery, his subconscious point of view may be thus expanded: "That old woman's fall might be supposed to excite pity, but being superior to such weak sentiments I am not deluded." So he triumphs in his own peculiar kind of sanity.

A child's laughter should offer clarifying examples. I remember being startled, long before I had thought the matter out, by observing how my daughter, then less than two years old, laughed most merrily at just those antics of a playful kitten that I myself found most diverting. Now I see that within the scope of the child's experience she had as good a right as I to triumph in the exercise of judgment, and more reason, because judg-

²Sully, *op. cit.*, 9-17.

ment was for her, so to speak, a newer plaything. The kitten by its capers repeatedly suggested that it was all the same as a real person, which the baby knew perfectly well was not true. The kitten's best moments as a comedian were those in which it most plausibly mimicked some human trait or purpose. If the impersonation had at any point become convincing, the baby would not have laughed. She might rather have been frightened out of her wits. But being well in possession of her wits, and using them vigorously to combat the kitten's wild assertions, she naturally rejoiced aloud.

A child who thus takes pleasure in thrusting off persuasive untruths soon learns to build up fictions for the fun of demolishing them. So we have play, which Sully considered almost identical with mirth. The true relation will now be manifest. Laughter is by no means always derived from play, but only when the plausible falsity that provokes it is framed with intention to create amusement. The pleasure of play (so far as it is "make-believe") resides precisely in our continuous perception of its unreality, and we enhance the realism of our play only so as to gloat the more in that perception.

One of the sources of the comic before which the cloud of mystery seems to have hung with a peculiar allurements may best be indicated by the general label "breaches of decorum." Analysis of one innocent example will serve to sweep away the fog from all, without, let us hope, dispelling any of their charm. Let us consider a man who snores in church, and why he is funny.

The atmosphere of a church may be put in the form of an assertion: "This is a solemn place where everyone is always quiet and attentive." The incongruous snore abruptly compels rejection of this proposition as merely plausible, at the same time offering the counter suggestion, "This man owes no reverence," which the mind as promptly dismisses because the disturbance is unintended and unimportant. Thus the ego's triumph lies partly in detecting the flaw in the church's veil of solemnity, and partly in perceiving the inconsequence of the defect.

The reader with a particular interest in this direction will find it easy to extend the principle to profanities, indecencies, tribal taboos, sexual lapses, and similar items the discussion of which has tended to impart a mystic air to anthropology. In every instance of the kind judgment will be found striking a balance between opposed pretensions of "decorum" or law, on the one hand, and the "breach" or liberty, on the other, and glorying in the sane escape from both.

In the few foregoing instances, I have tried to reduce the material to the simplest possible terms, to exhibit the working of the formula. Indeed the barest outline will suffice to diagram a multitude of jokes, including many good ones. But the laughable proposition may be double or complex, and generally it wears a fringe of implied comicalities, vague or subtle perhaps, but always enriching. Humor, I suppose, resides in such broad and indefinite implications, often conveyed by statements in no way comic of themselves, whereas wit is sharp, simple, and direct in outline. For illustration, let us glance at this yarn from a random newspaper:

"There is a philosophic old colored barber in Washington who is much patronized by statesmen. They find much that is edifying in his conversation.

"One day the old fellow, being in an especially talkative mood, made this observation to a newly arrived representative from the West:

"'Yo' has a large head, suh. It's a good thing to have a large head, fo' a large head means a large brain, an' a large brain is de most useful thing a man kin have, fo' it nourishes de roots of de hair.'"

The mainspring of the joke is in the last twenty words, which by themselves form a good single specimen of wit, assuming they were intended playfully. Yet they convey at least two main delusive falsehoods, the

instant double overthrow of which reassures us of sanity and unlooses elation. One may be put as "Brains nourish the roots of the hair;" the other as "The use of brains is to grow hair." But our laughter is the keener because of the beautifully laid approach to the pitfall, which remains invisible up to the very last words. The effect is also richer for a variety of comic elements that are only suggested or implied, involving, let us say, the known peculiarities of congressmen and of barbers, perhaps also of colored persons and of philosophers. Each of these elements could readily be dissected out and placed in the form of a plausible fallacy, contributing by its downfall to the glow of reason's satisfaction.

One is tempted to speculate on the social value, if any, of knowing what laughter is. I think it truly matters, but here a word in closing must suffice. I have mentioned how some writers have found cruelty and malice lurking in the happy faculty, and this is not the only charge laid against it. Hobbes' definition³, so apt in the phrase "sudden glory," has yet played a most unfortunate part in misleading later analysts, through the reference to "comparison with the infirmity of others" as the spring of laughter. Because Hobbes failed to perceive that in mirth the mind glories in its own successes, by comparison with nothing but its own avoided errors, a long train of thinkers have tended to look on laughter as implying vanity, arrogance, or selfishness. In point of fact, even when laughter seems to express malice or contempt, it is not the true voice of those emotions, but always of some residual shred of sympathy. Scorn may be expressed without sympathy and without laughter; if laughter enters, it can only mean that the laugher perceives how he might have shared the weakness that he contemns.

³Though frequently quoted, repeated here for comparison: "The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly."